

Chapter 1

History of Cultural Context in Positive Psychology: We Finally Come to the Start of the Journey

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1.1 History of Cultural Context in Positive Psychology

“Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant...there is the zest, the tingle, the excitement of reality; and there is ‘importance’ in the only real and positive sense in which importance ever anywhere can be.” – William James (1899, p. 139; excerpted from James 2007)

It is fitting to open a history of culture in positive psychology with these words of William James, not only because he was discussing what is best in life, but also because he actually was speaking directly about cultural factors in well-being. James in this piece was describing how on a visit to rural North Carolina, he viewed an area of felled forest upon which a rough homestead and meager farm had been erected. He saw the way of life exemplified there as miserable by his contemporary standards. However, James was informed by his driver that such toil was considered the only path to true happiness for the local people, representing freedom, self-sufficiency, and productivity in that place. Immediately James realized that the nature of personal fulfillment varied with cultural factors, and that his reflexive negative judgment of people different from himself had been deeply flawed.

When the field of positive psychology was officially introduced in lectures and writings (e.g., Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000), its stated aim was to counterbalance the prevailing scientific emphasis on psychopathology through rigorous empirical study of wellness, positive experiences and traits, and prosocial engagement with others and society. However, positive psychology has since been

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criticized as not only denigrating the contributions of established fields such as humanistic psychology (Taylor 2001), but also of promoting certain culturally-biased approaches, strengths, and morals – in particular those of Western majority (e.g., White male) culture (Becker and Marecek 2008; Christopher and Hickinbottom 2008; Christopher et al. 2008; McDonald and O’Callaghan 2008; Sandage et al. 2003). In essence, regarding culture, positive psychologists were accused of committing James’ (1899) prejudicial error again. It is our aim in this chapter to explore such criticisms, by reviewing how positive functioning has been approached over psychology’s history; how other areas of psychology laid the foundation for the rise of positive psychology; and how culture has been approached both within psychology generally, and within positive psychology specifically.

1.2 Historical and Philosophical Roots of Positive Psychology

Critics of positive psychology are correct to assert that global interest in individual well-being long precedes the twenty-first century. For example, ancient philosophical and religious texts from places as diverse as China, India, Greece, and the Middle East contain guidelines about behavior thought to optimize functioning and experience, such as the practice of courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence (Dahlsgaard et al. 2005). The connections between such cultural traditions and psychology have been rarely acknowledged (Segall et al. 1998), and this situation also holds for positive psychology (Roysircar 2012; Segall et al. 1998), despite the fact that philosophy and psychology were essentially synonymous until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (White 1992).

1.2.1 The First Century of Western Psychology and Well-Being

When increased emphasis on the scientific method contributed to Western psychology spinning off from philosophy (White 1992), the focus of psychology was on increasingly sophisticated empirical understanding of mental processes (e.g., consciousness and mental structure), divorced from making moralistic recommendations about desirable behavior. Therefore, little scholarly exploration of the meaning of “the good life” in early psychology was undertaken. However, constructs now considered related to positive psychology were occasionally addressed or implied. For example, in addition to William James’ (1899) writings on the positive outcomes of education, Sigmund Freud and his successors discussed how *Eros*, or life energy, provided vitality and positive dynamism to experience when unblocked through psychoanalysis (Ryan and Frederick 1997); Wilhelm Wundt expounded on pleasant emotions and their connections to cognition, memory, and volition (Blumenthal 1975); G. Stanley Hall investigated the functions of playful childhood behaviors in development (e.g., fun, tickling, wit, and humor;

White 1992); and John Dewey discussed how personal goal pursuit and empowerment foster intellectual and moral growth (Dewey 1900).

With the rise of behaviorism after John Watson's (1913) classic paper, psychology shifted away from studying the nature of consciousness to understanding and controlling the external drivers of observable behavior (to the dismay of Titchener 1914, and others). Thus, subjective experiences of well-being (or anything else, for that matter) were deemed by many unable to be studied (Tolman 1922). However, the behaviorists' wish to produce findings that were immediately applicable in real-world settings spoke to an intention to improve the human condition (e.g., Skinner's *Walden Two*, originally published in 1948; Skinner 2005). Their idea of positive functioning was optimal adaptation to one's circumstances, and because behavior could be (at least in great part) controlled externally, improving the lot of humankind was simply a matter of arranging the appropriate stimuli to create the appropriate responses (Rich 2001). Of course, it was soon recognized that any substantial attempt to apply principles of operant conditioning to the betterment of real individuals or societies would carry a host of problems (Stillman 1975), and thus were never instituted to the behaviorists' satisfaction.

Though behaviorism held prominence from about 1920 to 1950, the study of some aspects of cognition were always of interest to psychologists – namely, intelligence and intellectual ability (Flanigan and Harrison 2005). The assumption underlying this research was that high intelligence, particularly strong perceptual and problem-solving abilities, would be advantageous to people throughout schooling and into adulthood (and therefore comprise an individual strength). Critiques of intelligence assessment have focused on the validity of the various tests developed, rather than on the worthiness of being able to measure individual intelligence at all (Boake 2002; Flanigan and Harrison 2005). The so-called “cognitive revolution,” which then began in the 1950s, brought an increasing number of other mental processes back into the purview of psychological study (Miller 2003). However, it was not until the 1980s that a steady stream of papers began to define and explore positive cognitive variables such as subjective well-being, self-efficacy, and happiness. These cognitive variables, and others, are those now most identified with positive psychology, largely due to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) emphasis on such constructs.

Developmental psychology is unique within Western psychology, in that it has both had a long empirical history and consistently been interested in understanding well-being. A few decades after Hall's investigations into various childhood behaviors (White 1992), John Bowlby began developing his landmark theory of how *attachment* to caregivers was essential to good psychological health in young children (Bretherton 1992; van der Horst and van der Veer 2010) and fellow psychoanalysts such as Spitz concurred (Vicedo 2009). The mid-1950s saw a great increase in study of attachment theory, both through Bowlby's work, and through the international prominence acquired by scholars such as Harry Harlow and Mary Ainsworth (Bretherton 1992). Harlow examined seemingly innate and adaptive needs for attachment in infant rhesus monkeys, positing similar needs in human children (Vicedo 2009), and Mary Ainsworth (a student and collaborator of

Bowlby's) developed the well-known "Strange Situation" test of attachment quality, concluding that young children who showed secure attachment to their caregivers were more likely to show healthy emotional development than were children showing insecure attachments (Ainsworth and Bowlby 1991). The influence of such findings led Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) to lay claim to attachment for their new positive psychology, though developmental psychology and positive psychology remain distinct.

1.2.2 Other Important Predecessors to Positive Psychology

Various other movements within and outside of Western psychology have connections to positive psychology. For example, Becker and Marecek (2008) discussed how the spiritual-philosophical movement of New Thought (which began in the early nineteenth century) emphasized positive thinking as a means of promoting wellness, enjoyment of life, and improving people's relations with one another. Similarly, the mental hygiene movement, associated most closely with the early practice of psychiatry, focused on the prevention of mental illness, hoping to repeat the earlier success of public campaigns against communicable diseases like tuberculosis. Its Freudian and early behaviorist assumptions led proponents to claim that inappropriate parenting drove disturbances in personality, which in turn caused maladjustment (Cohen 1983). Like positive psychology, then, it aimed to improve individual adjustment to circumstances, albeit through often-misguided approaches (Becker and Marecek 2008). For example, mental hygienists targeted certain members of society (e.g., criminals, prostitutes, and "vagrants") for the identification of "mental deficiency," ignoring the ways in which societal inequalities could influence those behaviors (Toms 2010).

The early area of humanistic psychology known as *personology* (founded by Henry Murray) also emphasized personality characteristics in adjustment, noting as early as 1938 that positive and desirable personal characteristics were not yet receiving their due attention in psychology (Taylor 2001). Indeed, it is the scholars and practitioners of humanistic psychology that have argued most strongly for having been the main progenitors of positive psychology. Humanistic psychology, which arose in the 1960s, emphasizes "a view of the human being as irreducible to parts, needing connection, meaning, and creativity...[and] offering tools for personal and spiritual transformation" (Resnick et al. 2001, p. 75). Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow (among others) are credited with trying to push study of human flourishing to the forefront of psychology (Resnick et al. 2001; Taylor 2001), and when Division 32 (humanistic psychology) of the American Psychological Association was founded, its first brochure stated its adherence to the tenets of science in its effort to understand human experience (Aanstoos et al. 2000). It came as an unwelcome surprise to many humanistic psychologists, then, when Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) asserted that positive psychology was needed to correct the inability of humanistic psychology to contribute reliable and valid knowledge of

human wellness to scientific discourse. Humanistic psychologists took particular offense to the suggestion that the main legacy of humanistic psychology is not scientifically-useful findings, but rather popular self-absorption and “kooky” self-help practices (Friedman 2008; Held 2004; McDonald and O’Callaghan 2008; Resnick et al. 2001; Taylor 2001). By contrast, humanistic psychologists consider their discipline vibrant and productive, with qualitative and quantitative findings being continuously disseminated and applied to advance human wellness (McDonald and O’Callaghan 2008; Taylor 2001). While effort has been made to heal the wounds that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi’s (2000) comments inflicted upon humanistic psychology (e.g., Linley et al. 2006; Seligman 2005), there remains a painful rift between the fields (Robbins 2008).

The discipline of counseling psychology (and a closely-related field, social work) has also objected strongly to what it sees as reluctance from positive psychologists to acknowledge their shared roots (Linley 2006; Lopez and Magyar-Moe 2006). As described by Frazier et al. (2006), “focusing on strengths and positive adaptation is a central aspect of counseling psychology’s identity” (p. 293), a claim which has been empirically verified. In a content analysis of publications in counseling psychology journals, Lopez et al. (2006) concluded that counseling psychologists since 1954 have studied many constructs associated with positive psychology, including adaptability, hope, love, motivation, optimism, positive emotions, and values/ethics. Counseling psychologists have also highlighted their early emphasis on multiculturalism as an important factor in both research and practice in well-being (Constantine and Sue 2006; Frazier et al. 2006; Gerstein 2006; Lopez et al. 2006), a strength which they feel distinguishes counseling psychology from other fields.

It is clear that the twenty-first century positive psychology movement has captured the imagination of many within psychology and in popular culture. However, we conclude that the roots of the movement are so deep and broad that it cannot be considered unprecedented. We appreciate why a number of scholars may have felt snubbed when positive psychology was founded; however, we also see that empirical interest in well-being has been reinvigorated by its sudden prominence. We believe that the interdisciplinary origins of positive psychology give us reason to look forward to its interdisciplinary future, and that scientific discourse among diverse fields will further the shared goal of understanding and promoting wellness.

1.3 Issues of Race and Culture in Psychology’s First Century

Unfortunately, when culture arose in Western psychology prior to the 1980s (when counseling psychologists first articulated the benefits of recognizing cultural differences), it was not in the context of discussing strengths or positive experiences. Instead, we bear the scars of a shameful past, where supposedly scientific investigations into differences between Anglo-Saxon Whites and peoples of color progressed on a deeply misguided path for nearly 100 years, advancing oppression

ranging from denigration, to eugenics, to slavery (Leong et al. 2012; Tucker 1994). Early studies investigating racial differences in variables such as IQ or personality characteristics nearly always concluded that non-Whites differ in unfavorable ways from Whites, even when data were unclear or contradictory (e.g., Goodenough 1926; Tucker 1994). For the first few decades of Western psychology, there was an assumption that non-White, non-Western peoples possessed inherent biological deficiencies (e.g., Watson's [1913] reference to members of Aboriginal tribes as "savages" whose behavioral repertoires were far simpler than that of "educated Europeans," p. 168). The tools of early psychology were too often put to nefarious use when dealing with issues of cultural difference during this period (Leong et al. 2012; Richards 1997; Tucker 1994; Winston 2004), and by the mid-1920s, objections to the *deficit model* of racial minority psychology were growing louder (Kantor 1925; Leong et al. 2012; Sanchez 1932). In its place, though, arose the assumption that observed racial differences in personality variables, achievement, or IQ scores were due to socialization into inferior cultural values, and lack of access to the institutions of majority culture (e.g., "differences...being probably due to nurture," Garth 1930, p. 331; Tucker 1994). This *deprivations model*, though perhaps developed as a well-intentioned response to the deficit model, served to perpetuate negatively biased assumptions about minority groups (Dreger and Miller 1960; Tucker 1994).

Most recently, a minority of researchers have maintained a focus on supposed genetic differences between racial groups (e.g., differences in mean IQ scores; Rushton and Jensen 2005). However, most recent work has converged on a view of race, ethnicity, and culture in psychology that assumes that a combination of historical oppression, institutional disadvantage, implicit and/or explicit discrimination, and cultural differences in worldview offers the best explanation for group differences in behavior (Tucker 1994). There is also a clear effort to balance acknowledgement of group differences, with emphasis on within-group variability, as well as with aspects of behavior and experience that might be universal (Frazier et al. 2006). Still, knowledge of the psychological benefits associated with cultural background remains limited, as much more work has gone into understanding the negative impact of oppression (almost as an atonement for past harms perpetrated in the name of science). Therefore, recent interest in *multicultural positive psychology* is seen as long overdue (Roysircar 2012; Sandage et al. 2003).

1.4 Highlighting Culture in Twenty-First Century Positive Psychology

Our last goal is to explore culture within positive psychology in its first decade (roughly 2000–2010). Most positive psychology research has addressed positive emotion, and/or related cognitive constructs (such as creativity, emotional intelligence, and flow). A thorough review of all relevant constructs is impossible here; therefore, we focus the remainder of this review on hope, mindfulness, and optimism, and aspects of multiculturalism related to these constructs.

1.4.1 Hope

Hope research is closely aligned with positive psychology (Cheavens et al. 2006). In its most widely-known form, hope is conceived as a set of self-directed cognitions regarding one's ability to create goals, produce pathways (or plans to achieve those goals), and agency (or the motivation that sustains pursuit of those goals; Snyder 1989; Snyder et al. 2006). High levels of hope are associated with greater engaged coping behaviors (Chang and DeSimone 2001; Danoff-Burg et al. 2004), and more adaptive problem solving (Chang 1998b), as well as with a greater sense of life purpose and coherence (Feldman and Snyder 2005) and lower depressive symptomatology (Chang 2003). Higher hope in college students is predictive of academic success (Rand 2009; Snyder et al. 2002), and attainment of personal goals (Feldman et al. 2009); similarly, higher hope among mental health patients is associated with greater belief in psychotherapy efficacy, and predictive of more positive treatment outcomes (Irving et al. 2004). As such, hope would seem to be a powerful cognitive construct to promote in times of intellectual, psychological, or physical struggle.

Hope theory has been applied not only in White Western cultures, but also in American racial minority groups, and in various non-Western societies such as South Africa (Luthans et al. 2004) and in the Philippines (Bernardo 2010). Danoff-Burg et al. (2004) examined hope in a sample of African American college students, and found that students high in hope reported more use of active coping with race-related stressors than students low in hope did (though active coping was actually most helpful to the low-hope students). Chang and Hudson Banks (2007) examined possible racial group differences in hope, and concluded that though levels and correlates of hope do not differ across U.S. racial groups (specifically European American, African American, Asian American, and Latino American college students), the strongest predictors of agency and pathways thinking in these groups varied. For example, the strongest predictor of agentic thinking in European Americans was life satisfaction; in African Americans, it was negative problem orientation (i.e., poor self-efficacy and a tendency to view problems in one's social world as a threat to well-being); in Asian Americans, it was positive affect; and in Latino Americans, it was rational problem solving. Therefore, members of diverse groups may experience similar levels of hope, but the origins of hope may differ among members of different racial groups.

1.4.2 Mindfulness

Mindfulness is "intentional and nonjudgmental awareness of moment-to-moment experience" (Shapiro et al. 2008, p. 841). Self-report studies of mindfulness using measures like the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown and Ryan 2003) with predominantly White samples have indicated that greater tendencies towards mindfulness are associated with greater self-esteem (Thompson and

Waltz 2008), greater openness to experience, and greater optimism, as well as less neuroticism, lower anxiety, and less depressive symptomology (Brown and Ryan 2003), even controlling for other maladaptive variables such as perfectionism or poor social problem solving (Argus and Thompson 2008). Much of the knowledge on the benefits of mindfulness has come from empirical studies of interventions meant to foster mindfulness (e.g., Baer 2003; Carmody and Baer 2007; Kabat-Zinn 2003; Shapiro et al. 2008). For example, engagement in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) may improve psychological well-being (Carmody and Baer 2007), increase one's capacity to forgive others (Shapiro et al. 2008), and decrease psychological symptoms of distress, possibly via increases in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral flexibility (Carmody et al. 2009) or decreases in maladaptive cognitive distortions (Sears and Kraus 2009).

Mindfulness, with its roots in Buddhist spirituality, is a good example of how non-Western thought can be applied meaningfully in Western settings (Kabat-Zinn 2003). However, studies of mindfulness in various non-White racial groups have been few; where race has been examined as a potential covariate in linear analyses, significant differences across groups have not emerged (Creswell et al. 2007; Roemer et al. 2009). Some evidence has been found for cross-cultural understanding of mindfulness (Christopher et al. 2009a, b; Ghorbani et al. 2008; Jermann et al. 2009), though there appear to be some differences in how Western vs. non-Western individuals conceptualize and assess their own mindfulness.

1.4.3 Optimism

According to Scheier and Carver's (1985) widely-used definition, the optimist holds a *generalized positive outcome expectancy* about his or her future, typically believing that situational outcomes will be favorable to himself or herself. Optimism carries benefits such as greater life satisfaction, more positive affect and fewer depressive symptoms (Chang 1998a; Chang and Sanna 2001; Marshall et al. 1992), and may interact with factors like life stress to affect outcome. For example, Chang and Sanna (2003) found that when faced with life hassles, optimistic adolescents developed significantly less depressive symptoms and hopelessness than those who were pessimistic. Optimists also tend to use more active or problem-focused methods to cope with stressors (Nes and Segerstrom 2006) and exhibit more persistence in mastering difficult tasks (Nes et al. 2005; Segerstrom 2001) than pessimists. Still, there is evidence that not all correlates and consequences of optimism are positive, an important point to consider within and outside of the positive psychology movement (Chang et al. 2008).

The multicultural applicability of optimism has been shown in a number of studies; for example, among African Americans, optimism has been associated with greater resilience and reduced psychological distress (Baldwin et al. 2011), while experiencing racism has been associated with decreased optimism in this group (Mattis et al. 2003). Other studies, though, find that African Americans and European

Americans may not differ significantly in optimism (Brown et al. 2006) despite their different experiences of racism and life stress. Studies have also examined differences between Asian/Asian Americans and (most often) European Americans on optimism, with studies often showing few group differences on optimism levels (e.g., Chang 1996; Hardin and Leong 2005). Interestingly, Chang (1996) showed that while Asians/Asian Americans did not differ from European Americans in optimism, Asians/Asian Americans showed greater levels of pessimism; however, this pessimism was not accompanied by increased negative mood or negative problem orientation (as it was in European Americans). This indicates that the optimism-pessimism dichotomy may hold significantly different meaning among different racial and ethnic groups. Optimistic bias (the tendency to believe positive events are likely to happen to the self, and negative events are likely to happen to others) has also been examined in these groups. For example, Japanese college students have been found to be less optimistic than European Americans about their own chances of experiencing negative life events (Chang and Asakawa 2003; Chang et al. 2001).

1.5 Conclusion: A Look Back, and the Path Ahead

Frankly, we find it stunning to realize how long the road is behind us, which has now led to the very beginning of multicultural positive psychology. While it may now seem simple to ask, “What do members of various cultures possess or experience that assists their wellness?” the rocky and halting history behind that question indicates it is not simple at all. Multicultural positive psychology has gradually woven threads from many sectors of psychology together with a spirit of social justice, to start a tapestry of great potential beauty. However, it is incumbent upon present and future generations of researchers in this area to acknowledge the depth and breadth of their roots, as well as to advocate for positive and collaborative applications of findings to individuals, groups, and communities (Downey and Chang 2012). There have certainly been past errors, and the cynics may take that as reason to criticize present work in this area as “too little, too late.” However, it is our belief that the only meaningful way to correct past errors is to accelerate the search for knowledge that will outshine the past darkness. We are glad to say that we see many reasons to hope for just such an outcome.

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